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Major Illness Said To Incapacitate Syrian President

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Syrian President Hafez Assad apparently has been incapacitated by a serious illness—most likely a heart attack—since mid-November, and it is uncertain just how the Damascus government is making decisions during the current crisis, according to U.S. and diplomatic sources.

Assad has not been seen publicly or by visiting Arab leaders since he entered a hospital in Damascus on Nov. 12 with what was officially described at the time as appendicitis.

Reagan administration officials say they believe his illness is far more serious, but that they have no hard independent confirming information. U.S. officials say their best information comes from other sources, including the Israelis and the Saudi Arabians.

Syria's government is being run for now by a committee of five individuals, diplomatic sources say. This group, according to Israeli sources, is composed of: Assad's brother, Rifaat Assad; Foreign Minister Abdel Halim Khaddam; Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas; army chief of staff Hikmat Shihabi; and minister of interior and chief of security Ali Duba.

According to Israeli sources, Assad suffered a heart attack that was related to his previously known diabetes condition. Israeli intelligence has concluded that Assad is having problems recuperating, but the extent of these problems and the nature of his incapacitation is uncertain.

Other diplomatic sources offer an account that is somewhat more detailed, but not inconsistent with this version. They say that Assad was at first hospitalized with a blood clot in his left leg, that he then suffered either a heart attack or a stroke, and that he is now partially paralyzed.

These sources also say that Syria is now apparently being run by Assad's inner circle of advisers.

U.S. and diplomatic sources say that more compelling evidence that Assad is incapacitated is the fact that he did not see two loyal allies who made recent visits to Damascus. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Faisal did not see Assad during his recent extended visit there—an extremely unusual circumstance, officials say—and neither did former Lebanese prime minister Rashid Karami.

Yesterday, Syria's ambassador to the United States, Rafic Jouejati, appeared on the PBS' McNeil/Lehrer television show and said that his information was that Assad had recovered and

was back at work. He said:

"According to my information . . . the president had an operation, not a major one, minor one. It had some complications. The period of convalescence extended a little bit. It was supposed to be three days, it extended to a week.

"And then a few days ago, he inaugurated a project of a bridge construction over Damascus, regulating the exit to the west. And for the last two days, we received communications signed by his name, which indicates that he resumed work."

Just how Assad's illness affects Syrian decision-making in this time of crisis is unclear, U.S. and diplomatic sources say.

"We have not seen any instability in their decision-making yet," said one senior U.S. official. "Our feeling is that he has suffered some serious illness. But our own available information is very weak. We get information from the Israelis and from other diplomatic sources. But we can't confirm it independently."

The U.S. officials believe Assad is still alive, and may still be making some decisions. One senior administration official said: "Our feeling is that it was pretty much of a one-man show there before. And if he [Assad] was out of it, we would see a lot of jockeying for power. And we don't see that. So he probably is making some decisions."

Some American, Arab and Israeli officials have come to the conclusion that Syrian officials have probably used old photographs and television video tape in an effort to convince Syrians and outsiders that Assad is in good health.

U.S. and diplomatic sources cited as an example a recent wire service photograph transmitted from Damascus. It showed Assad apparently holding policy discussions with his colleagues.

But Israeli sources said that one of the officials in the photo was Defense Minister Tlas, who they say was actually not in Damascus at all that day.

Staff researcher Maralee Schwartz contributed to this report.